

# Action Learning



**AN APPROACH TO  
DRIVING BUSINESS INNOVATION &  
DEVELOPING THE LEADERSHIP PIPELINE**

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# 3 objectives

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- Get a deeper understanding of Action Learning and its use
- Identify five factors critical for successful Action Learning
- Learn one way that Action Learning can drive business innovation and succession planning

# Agenda

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- Hopes and Concerns
- Action Learning 101: Definition and history
- Case studies: You find the errors!
- Action Learning 201: A success case
- Action Learning 301: Juicy action learning topics
- Action Learning 401: Talking with the business about Action Learning
- Wrap, Q&A

# Hopes and Concerns

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# Action Learning 101: Definition & History

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## **Action Learning**

- Educational process done in small groups
- Learn through taking action /reflecting on actions
- In 1940s Reginald Revans originates, with inquiry at core
- In 1970's Action Reflection Learning inserted team challenges & team coaches
- In 2000's Leadership Pipeline

# Case studies: You find the errors!

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# Case 1: Straight Outta Yale

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- Jake, straight out of Yale and wanting to make an impression in his first 90 days on the job, persuades the SVP of HR to fund a new Action Learning Program based on several books he read.
- The nomination-only program includes top professors from his grad program, fancy hotel in Luxembourg, & focuses on genuine business challenges facing the company.
- After a sizzling launch, the sizzle fizzles. Participants complain that their bosses don't want them to spend work time on the program, and generally don't seem interested. After the Learning teams begin to make recommendations, a powerful SVP tells the teams they are in danger of violating his organization's turf. Ultimately, participants find excuses to stop attending Action Learning meetings.
- *What went wrong?*

# Case 2: The Right Stuff

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- Adam, newly in charge of the Action Learning program, had to figure out a business critical challenge for hi-po's to work on, and asked his HR managers for ideas. They chose reorganizing the organizational reporting structures, because the HR managers thought it was important. Adam himself had gotten really busy, and didn't have time to focus on the nuts and bolts of this anymore.
- The Action Learning program got off to a great start. High potential leaders chosen, appropriate communications developed, high level sponsorship gained.
- As the months wore on, the program wasn't moving forward. Team meetings got cancelled, the team seemed bogged down in indecision, and morale was low.
- *What went wrong?*

# Case 3: Who's on the Bus?

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- Phyllis knew that she wanted to develop an Action Learning program at her company to help build the leadership pipeline. She was aware of a number of retiring baby boomers who needed to be replaced.
- She decided to ask VP's and Senior Directors who their choices for the Action Learning program would be, giving them freedom to make their own choices. After all, this was a company that believed in autonomy.
- Several months into the program, the coach called a meeting with her to discuss the participants, their progress, and what was and wasn't happening. At the meeting she learned that mostly things weren't happening.
- *What went wrong?*

# Case 4: Driving the Business

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- Acme Tech's CEO says, "We will grow exponentially in emerging markets," but Wall Street Analysts hammer him for mediocre growth in Brazil.
- Acme's HR VP astutely focuses Acme's Action Learning Program on how to unlock growth over the next 3 years in Brazil.
- The Action Learning teams go to Brazil to interview current & prospective customers, and to analyze Acme's reputation, pricing, competitors, sales channels, etc.
- At the program's conclusion in Sao Paulo, the CEO takes the HR VP aside & says, "While it is nice to have recommendations about how to improve things in Brazil, I expected this program to improve our Leadership Pipeline. But I am disappointed to see no evidence that any of the participants have grown *as leaders* in this process."
- *What went wrong?*

# Case 5: What about me?

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- JaJa Biopharm designs a World Class Action Learning Program focused on business innovation, including great faculty, venue, team coaches, business challenges & exec sponsorship
- Assuming that Program nominees already know they are “High Potential,” and those who aren’t invited might take offense, Program leaders communicate on a “need to know” basis
- During the course of the program, two participants leave JaJa, citing bigger growth opportunities elsewhere.
- Once they discover that some of their peers are participating in the Program, strong performers complain. One sales manager grumbles, “What kind of corporate politics are being played? I am not nominated to this program when everyone knows my region has reported the strongest results for the past 5 quarters...”
- *What went wrong?*

# The Five Factors for Successful Action Learning \*

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- Establish strong executive sponsorship
- Select pressing business challenges & scope them appropriately
- Invest in participants with the most leadership potential
- Challenge your action learning teams with strong team coaching
- Communicate broadly about your action learning program

\* Seth Lieberman & Sheila Diggs (CLO Publishing) 2010.

# Action Learning 201: Success Case

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**FOCUSING ACTION  
LEARNING ON BUSINESS  
INNOVATION**

# Action Learning Program Overview: Strategic Innovation

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# Action Learning 301: Juicy action learning topics

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- In small groups, brainstorm some juicy action learning topics
- See if you can tie them to INNOVATION!
- Use your own companies to generate ideas– what are some business issues that need solving, that a team of high potential individuals will be able to sink their teeth into?
- Report out after 10 minutes of idea generation!

# Action Learning 401: Talking with the business about Action Learning

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- Figure out what the “sell” is for your organization because you’re asking them to innovate beyond what they already know how to do
- How do you go about this?
- What does your self- talk have to be?
- Who can help you?

# Wrap, Q&A

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**THANK YOU!**

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